

April 2004

What you are about to read is a "4-sider," a short, informal essay or article on a subject that is pertinent to Jewish educators and to advocacy for Jewish educators. The questions that follow the article can be used to provoke thought and encourage discussion among your peers and supervisors, as well as among lay leaders and board representatives. We hope that you will use this information to help further the work of CAJE and thus become a partner with the Advocacy Commission. We encourage you to use these "4-siders" to assist you in bringing about positive change and pursuing excellence in, as well as improving the quality of, Jewish education. Talk about these issues. Let us know what you think by contacting us at advocacy@caje.org.

Thank you,
Michelle Rapchik-Levin,
Professional Advocacy Chair

- [Archived Hanukat CAJE Articles](#)

Education, per se, and especially the teaching of young children, is high on the scale of Jewish values. If one would ask a teacher, "Why do you teach in a Jewish school?" more likely than not part of the answer would be "L'shaym shamayim" ("For the sake of heaven"), for the love of Judaism, for the inner satisfaction s/he derives from teaching Torah. These are beautiful and most admirable motives and much to be commended. But, realistically, they are not enough; we live on earth, not in heaven. And teachers both need and deserve appropriate and adequate compensation, in salary and in benefits such as health insurance and pension -- just as professionals in other fields receive.

The three excerpts from recent articles in the Jewish press* that you are about to read most likely will evoke in you all kinds of feelings -- anger and sadness and hope and in-between. A careful examination of these reactions hopefully will motivate you to act on them in positive and efficacious ways. You will then become an advocate -- or continue advocating -- for fair compensation for Jewish educators and, by doing so, you will help effect change.

At the beginning of this article we read about Dini Givon, a dedicated and talented teacher whose sudden death draws our attention to the serious lack of health insurance as part of compensation for Jewish educators. In addition, we learn of the (unbelievably) low salary scale for head teachers in Jewish early childhood classrooms. We are also made aware of positive steps being taken to help monetarily in the area of health benefits for Jewish educators and the grant awarded to CAJE by the Covenant Foundation to help advocate for fair compensation and benefits for early childhood educators.

"First to Come, Last to Leave" by Julie Wiener - Staff Writer at The Jewish Week in New York City January 9, 2004

When nursery school teacher Dini Givon was assigned a classroom with an unusual box protruding from the ceiling, she did not complain. Instead, she immediately devised plans to integrate the strange ceiling into an elaborate classroom sukkah, one that drew visitors from the entire school.

"She always seized every opportunity to do something special," recalled her boss, Sharon Hirshik, the early childhood director at the Temple Israel Center in White Plains. Members and staff at the 800-family Conservative synagogue were in shock this week (week of January 4, 2004) after the vibrant teacher's sudden death Sunday from a rare infection.

The Israeli-born Givon, 47, left behind a husband and a 4-year-old daughter who is a student at Temple Israel Center.

Colleagues at Temple Israel Center remembered Givon for her warm personality and enthusiasm for her work. Givon participated in a number of Jewish learning and professional development courses, including a special Israel trip this year that was sponsored by UJA-Federation of New York and the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York.

Givon's sudden death comes at a time when many advocates for Jewish early childhood educators are drawing attention to the fact that most such teachers - like Givon - do not receive health insurance benefits. In addition to their lack of benefits, the pay for such positions is lower than in any other area of Jewish education, even though in New York most early childhood educators have master's degrees.

According to the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education, the median income for a head teacher in a Jewish nursery school is \$19,550. Such an employment climate makes it hard for schools to recruit young people to the field, CAJE officials say. Indeed, the median age is 48, and the vast majority are married women who appear to depend on their husbands' careers for income and benefits.

While many Manhattan nursery school teachers receive health benefits, such perks are virtually unheard of for their peers in the outer boroughs and suburbs - even in affluent communities like Westchester County.

According to Jason Cury, president of the Joseph S. Gruss Life Monument Fund, many nursery school teachers throughout the New York area are eligible for a plan offered through his fund and UJA-Federation. The two organizations jointly pay approximately 20 percent of the health insurance premium for Jewish day school teachers who work at least 20 hours per week and congregational schoolteachers and early childhood educators who work at least 12 hours per week, Cury said. (Teachers of 2-year-olds are not covered.) Teachers are also eligible for life insurance through the Gruss Fund; Givon's family will receive a benefit of \$100,000, Cury said.

CAJE recently received a grant from the Covenant Foundation to advocate for better compensation and benefits for early childhood educators. "This unfortunate loss only serves to escalate and reinforce the issue of our being right, that the need is real and not contrived and that there are people out there who desperately need this kind of basic coverage because it's not available to them otherwise," said Eliot Spack, executive director of CAJE.

It is not clear whether Givon's lack of health insurance contributed to her untimely death. According to her husband, Kevin McInerney, the family was covered through his job until six months ago.....

In this article we are confronted with the fact that the salaries of Jewish early childhood teachers are low and, more often than not, they do not receive health insurance and other benefits. There are sources, however, such as the fund established by Joseph S. Gruss in conjunction with UJA-Federation that subsidize health insurance for Jewish educators. However, these funds' limitations present problems because of their guidelines as to what populations are eligible to receive their benefits and also because they cover only part of the cost of health insurance. An important point brought up in this article is that the amount of tuition brought in by many synagogue pre-school programs greatly exceeds the cost of running them - and that, in spite of that, the early childhood teachers still do not receive adequate compensation.

Vital Work, No Perks

by Julie Wiener - Staff Writer at The Jewish Week in New York City
February 20., 2004

Ten years ago, when Amy Kagan began her career in early childhood education, health benefits were a "non-issue" for her. She was married to a banker whose career provided health insurance for the whole family, and she wanted a job she could do while her children were in school.

She loves teaching 3-year-olds at the Hewlett-East Rockaway Jewish Center in East Rockaway, L.I., even though the job doesn't put her "in the upper stratosphere of financial freedom." But now that she's in the midst of a divorce that will leave her without health insurance, she's not sure she can afford it anymore. "How can I feel about it?" she asked. "This is obviously not the optimal situation. I didn't have to address it up to this point and now I will have to."

Kagan is one of many Jewish early childhood teachers left vulnerable by the fact that, by and large, their field provides low salaries and no benefits....Veteran early childhood teachers in New York average salaries of less than \$26,000, and with the exception of those working in Jewish day schools and in Manhattan, few are eligible for health benefits, either from their employers or the Fund for Jewish Education, a local communal fund designed to provide benefits for Jewish educators.

"Despite the fact that all research shows that the early years are the most critical not only for education but for creating Jewish identity, Jewish early childhood educators are the low man on the totem pole," said Cheryl Meskin, director of early childhood for the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York.

Nearly three decades ago, businessman Joseph S. Gruss ran into an impoverished man on the street and was horrified to learn that he was a retired yeshiva teacher who, like most of his colleagues at that time, had received no pension or benefits despite his years of service to Jewish education. Gruss pressed New York's United Jewish Appeal and Federation of Jewish Philanthropies - the two later merged to become UJA-Federation of New York - to join him in establishing a fund that, among other things, would provide Jewish teacher benefits....(The accomplishments of) the groundbreaking fund ... include annually subsidizing health insurance for more than 3,500 local Jewish teachers, most of them in day schools. The 25-year-old Gruss-Federation partnership, known as the Fund for Jewish Education, is one of the only such programs of its kind nationally, and is often cited as a model for other communities. The fund invests \$2.1 million each year in benefits programs, including a life insurance program that teachers receive for free. On top of that, the Caroline and Joseph S. Gruss Life Monuments Fund, a supporting foundation of the federation, contributes an additional \$2.1 million annually for benefits.

However, some people are suggesting that the Fund for Jewish Education does not go far enough. In particular, they complain that the fund only serves a limited number of schools, that the requirements are designed in such a way that they effectively exclude most teachers in synagogue-based schools, and that the benefits have not kept up with the soaring cost of health insurance. The BJE's Meskin says that many pre-school directors have called her over the years and "begged me to find them a venue for health insurance coverage," only to learn that their institution was not eligible for the Fund for Jewish Education benefits. "It's impossible for Jewish early childhood educators who were not grandfathered into this program to get in," she said, adding that the field's low salaries and lack of benefits is creating a situation in which "very, very few people are coming into this field."

....While acknowledging that their program does not help everyone, officials with the Fund for Jewish Education defend their role. "You can only do so much and our major priority is with the day school teachers," said Jason Cury, president of the Caroline and Joseph S. Gruss Life Monuments Fund, noting that day school teachers generally work more hours than synagogue-based teachers.

The Fund for Jewish Education's reach is limited by several factors. The program has enrolled almost no new institutions - day school or synagogue - in more than a decade. In addition, it limits synagogue participation to congregations with Hebrew school teachers who work at least 12 hours per week, although few Hebrew schools operate for more than six hours per week. Even if a synagogue's nursery school teachers work 20 hours a week or more, registration must be done through the Hebrew school. So, if the Hebrew school doesn't meet the requirements, the nursery school is also ineligible. More than 83 percent of the 206 institutions that participate in the Fund for Jewish Education's health benefit are day schools. And of the 3,560 Jewish educators whose health insurance is subsidized by the fund, only 116 are employed in synagogues. Exacerbating the fund's limitations is the fact that outside Manhattan, few synagogues offer health insurance plans to their teachers. Even when educators are fortunate enough to work in institutions that are eligible for the Fund for Jewish Education, the program's monthly contribution of \$50 for a single person and \$125 for a family constitutes only a fraction of the cost of today's premiums. Unless the employer also contributes to a teacher's premium - few synagogues do - not many early childhood educators can afford to pay the remaining hundreds of dollars per month out of pocket.

....Are health benefits for early childhood educators the responsibility of the synagogues that employ them or the broader Jewish community? Asked why they do not provide benefits to their teachers, many synagogues note that the teachers work fewer than 40 hours per week and that providing benefits would be too costly.

....Advocates for early childhood educators often note bitterly that many of the same institutions that claim they have no money for benefits do provide them for other staff, including custodians. Eli Schaap, assistant executive director at the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education, the largest membership organization for Jewish educators in North America, said many synagogue nursery school programs bring in more money than they spend. "Everyone knows day schools and Hebrew schools are money-losing propositions. But that's not true in early childhood," he said, noting that nursery schools with full enrollment generate "a significant income" for their host institutions. In one New York-area synagogue with which he is familiar, Schaap said nursery school tuition revenues total approximately \$750,000, while only \$450,000 is spent directly on the program. "Let me totally overstate and say they are spending another \$100,000 for overhead," he said. "You're still left with \$200,000 going to the rest of the institution. ... If you divide that among the teachers they would have an extra \$6,500 a year" - enough to pay for, or at least subsidize, health benefits.

As for UJA-Federation and the Caroline and Joseph S. Gruss Life Monuments Funds, (which Joseph Gruss established as a supporting foundation of the federation), why have they not tried to expand the benefits program so more could be served? Officials with the groups say they are in the middle of reviewing priorities and considering ways to make more money available for benefits, perhaps reallocating some of the approximately \$3 million the Fund for Jewish Education currently allocates annually to other causes besides benefits. So far, the partners have not made an effort to recruit new donors. "We're never going to turn away more partners," said Rabbi Deborah Joselow, managing director of the federation's Commission on Jewish Identity and Renewal and the federation professional who oversees the relationship with the Gruss Life Monument Funds. "But we're at the delicate, important stage of figuring out how to strengthen this partnership. Before you turn to other partners you have to clarify your mission together." The Gruss Funds' Cury said his foundation has not sought other partners because benefits are a tough sell to family foundations and other philanthropists. "It's not something innovative in terms of programming," Cury said. "It's kind of like operating expenses."

Most foundation folks and others are looking for cutting-edge kinds of programming." While Gruss and UJA-Federation expect to complete their discussion about spending priorities this spring, it is not clear if synagogues and their early childhood educators will benefit from any changes made.

With an aging cadre of teachers and without benefits or competitive salaries, Jewish nursery schools are on the brink of a hiring crisis, advocates say. Indeed, few young people are entering the field of Jewish early childhood education, where the median age nationally is 48. Those currently in it - and the overwhelming majority are women - generally depend on their husbands' income and benefits. But with more families accustomed to dual incomes, fewer women are willing to work under such conditions. Schools are only functioning now, the BJE's Meskin said, because they are hanging on to longtime teachers who "are not ready to leave." The schools are "riding it out, but in another seven years I don't foresee that the same kind of person is going to be in this field," Meskin said. "Young people we want to attract are not thinking about this as a career choice.".....CAJE's Schaap said. "If you do this well," he said, "then people go onto day schools, Jewish camps and join synagogues - you get a whole shift in terms of identity."

[COMPLETE ARTICLE](#)

Questions Upon Which to Ponder and To Discuss:

1. What is your gut reaction to the story of Dini Givon?
2. What should the policymakers be doing in this situation?
3. Were you shocked when you read of the median income of head teachers in Jewish Early Childhood Programs?
4. Why do you think younger people are not drawn to the field? (CAJE research shows the median age of teachers at the present time is 48.) How can we encourage them to teach in Jewish schools? What do you think your community could do to attract Jewish educators to the field?

Early childhood educators in Jewish schools, those teaching in day schools, and communal workers in Jewish organizations and synagogues share the fact that the majority barely earn a living and most do not receive health care packages or other benefits as part of their compensation. Jewish executives and rabbis, for the most part, earn considerably more than the bare minimum described above. Some have spoken out publicly in opposition to the unfair compensation of educators and communal workers and have urged that this unfair treatment be examined and changed in the light of Jewish values with regard to education.

"Low Wages Force Workers To Struggle" by Marc Ballon, Senior Writer at The Jewish Journal, Los Angeles, CA January 2, 2004

For Vera Haim, teaching Jewish children about their religion, history and culture gave her life a deeper meaning. For 17 years, the 53-year-old Israeli-born educator taught at Jewish nursery schools throughout Southern California, most recently at Temple Kol Tikvah in Woodland Hills. Nothing made Haim happier than helping young students develop self-esteem and a curiosity about their roots.

But her dream job held the seeds of a nightmare. Earning just \$15,000 annually and, with no health-care benefits, Haim landed in dire financial straits after she and her husband divorced last year. Unable to support herself, she had to move in with her 31-year-old son. In short order, she left Kol Tikvah and nearly doubled her income by opening a home day-care business in her son's house.

"I think babysitters make more per hour than nursery school teachers, especially at Jewish schools," Haim said. "You work so hard with those children, but what you get paid is nothing, nothing."

.....A study by the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education found that nearly two in three people working at Jewish nursery schools failed to receive company-paid medical benefits.

.....Locally, Jewish agency executives and rabbis said they would like to pay their employees more but simply lack the means to do so. With donations flat and workers' compensation and health-care costs skyrocketing, salaries for low-wage workers appear unlikely to improve anytime soon.

That infuriates Jon Lepie, a consultant to the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Local 800. He said nearly 20 percent of the 450 full- and part-time unionized workers at The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles, Jewish Family Service (JFS) and five other agencies earn less than \$20,000 a year. To cite but two examples, a full-time nursery school teacher assistant at the West Valley Jewish Community Center (JCC) makes less than \$16,000, while a SOVA driver delivering food to the needy from the food bank makes about \$12,500. "It's a shonda that Jewish agencies should pay anybody less than a living wage," Lepie said.

.....Rabbi Mark Diamond said he thinks Jewish institutions should do more. The executive vice president of the Board of Rabbis of Southern California said Jewish law mandates that workers receive fair wages and benefits.

He said synagogues and Jewish organizations should serve as "community exemplars." That some fall short upsets him, especially since so many Jewish leaders loudly proclaim support for unions and workers' rights.

"Before we point fingers, we need to look inward and make sure we're treating our workers and staff in the Jewish community with fairness and equity," Diamond said. "I'm aware that not every synagogue or organization lives up to the ideals of Jewish tradition."

.....Low wages notwithstanding, many temple and Jewish communal employees express high job satisfaction. They enter their chosen professions not to grow rich but rather to make a difference. They also like the family-friendly work environments and time off for Jewish holidays, including Shabbat, said Marla Eglash Abraham, associate director of the School of Jewish Communal Service at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles.

.....Senior Rabbi Steven Z. Leder (of Wilshire Boulevard Temple) said the synagogue provides fully paid health care and pensions for its employees

.....As much as Wilshire Boulevard Temple does, though, sometimes, good intentions run up against hard economic realities. The temple, like many businesses and institutions, doesn't provide health insurance for employees' family members, forcing workers to make difficult choices. At a minimum of \$231.87 per month to cover a spouse and \$424.32 per family, some employees opt to take their chances. That's what happened to a temple maintenance man. After his uninsured wife fell ill, he found himself near financial ruin as medical bills mounted. Upon hearing of his plight, Wilshire Boulevard Temple executives raised thousands among themselves to help defray the woman's medical expenses.....

[COMPLETE ARTICLE](#)

Questions Upon Which To Ponder and To Discuss:

1. Vera Heim is the typical example of a dedicated Jewish early childhood educator who was very happy with her opportunity "to help young students develop self esteem and a curiosity about their roots." What could have been done to encourage her to remain in her position as a teacher? How did you feel when you read that she left her position and opened a day-care facility in her son's home, thereby nearly doubling her former (unbelievably small \$15,000 a year) income?
 2. How could policymakers and the community work together to make decisions on teachers' compensation that are reflective of our Jewish values? Does the information in this article reflect the real values of today's Jewish society? If "yes," how? If "no," what does it reflect?
 3. What is the shared vision of Jewish education at your institution (including all the key stakeholders)? How does this vision translate into budgetary policy especially at a time of tight budgets?
-

Questions Upon Which To Ponder and To Discuss

1. Now that you have read all three articles, what do you feel policymakers in your community can do to effect change?
 2. What can you do to advocate for these issues in your community?
-

We welcome your comments and feedback, which can be sent to advocacy@caje.org .